



**SHARING TRADITION**—Native elder Madeline Solomon spent six weeks this semester sharing stories about the old days with students at the Alaska Native Studies program at the University of Alaska-Fairbanks.

*Mike Belrose/News-Miner*

# Native elder guides students on journey of old river life

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Madeline Solomon bent her head as she spoke about the topic of luck. Her long white hair hung loosely down her back as she stared at the rose on a beaded barrette in her hands.

"Bad luck is really hard to bear," she said.

Her words fell softly into a microphone set up on a desk in the middle of a room at the University of Alaska-Fairbanks last week. Nearly 30 students sat in a circle around her.

Solomon's lecture was part of a new program in the university's Alaska Native Studies department in which students learn Native traditions and stories first-hand from elders. The students met with Solomon twice a week for six weeks during the first half of the semester.

Athabascans who lived along the Kateel River in the early 1900s protected their fortune in a variety of ways, she said.

"One thing they did was push new dogsleds and snowshoes in the direction of the sun first so they wouldn't break," she said.

Women destroyed birch bark baskets when they didn't find berries during fruit-gathering trips and men got rid of fish nets that didn't catch fish.

"Men had to be careful of new fish nets," she said. "If they put one into the river and they got nothing, that means something bad is going to happen to one person in the family."

Solomon has had her share of misfortune during the past 80 years. Her husband of 22 years was killed when the family dog team ran him over on a caribou hunting trip. Six of her 12 children died of diseases.

But she didn't talk about grief. "That's the way life is," she said. "You can't have good luck all the time."

Solomon finished her lecture series on Thursday. Another Native elder, Isa Sovolik, an Inupiaq Eskimo from Barrow, will instruct the class during the final half of the course.

The class agenda is largely unstructured, according to Eliza Jones, class professor. Few books are required and students are expected to ask questions to encourage the elders to talk.

More than 10 Native elders

have come to Fairbanks from various rural areas around the state since the program was started in 1981, Jones said.

The elders live in an apartment on campus during their stay at UAF. Solomon said she enjoys teaching but is anxious to return home.

"I can't sleep no more," she said. "I miss my grandchildren."

Solomon lives in Galena, where she takes care of three teenagers and one 7-year-old boy. She moved to the town to teach bilingual courses at Galeana High School in 1974. She retired three years ago.

Before her move, she spent nearly 60 years trapping, fishing and hunting on the banks of the Kateel, Koyukuk and Yukon rivers.

Solomon was born in a winter hunting camp on the Kateel River. Her mother, who was single at the time, put the baby up for adoption. Solomon lived a nomadic life in Nllato on the Yukon River until her family sent her upstream to school at the nearby Holy Cross Mission.

When she was 16, her adoptive parents arranged her marriage to John Dayton, who was 15 years her senior. Together, they fished in the summer and trapped in the winter.

"A lot of times I miss that life, nowadays—traveling around in the cold in the winter," she said.

Solomon and her husband camped for several months each winter. They used two cabins on the Kateel River as their base for supplies while they ran a 150-mile trapline.

"We would load flour and sugar and cases of dried fruit onto the sleigh," she said, "and we would stay out a long as the dog food lasted."

If it was too cold to take the dogs, the family would bundle up and walk the lines on snowshoes with packs on their backs. They used canvas tents on all their excursions. All of their clothes were homemade.

"It may sound hard now," she said, "but it was our life and we really loved it."

She continued trapping by herself for a year after Dayton died. She then married Herbert Solomon, her husband for nearly 40 years. Herbert died six years

ago.

When she was young, all the women she knew got married, raised families and worked on the trapline. "In those days, it was easy to grow up because it was very clear what you had to do," she said. "It's more complicated now—so many choices."

Solomon told the UAF students about a friend of hers who had to leave Nulato village to become a man's second wife. The custom of having more than one wife was common before priests came to rural areas in Alaska in the late 1800s.

"This girl was young, about 14, when a man came down the river for her. She went with him, thinking he was her brother. Later, she found out he wanted her to be his second wife," Solomon said. "It was hard because the first wife didn't like her at all. She used to tear up all her clothes and in those days it was really hard to get more. The older wife finally died and so did the man and the woman was able to move back to Nulato."

Solomon also recalled the healing power of medicine men. "I heard the reason there are no medicine men today is that something came over and took their power away because they were having too many fights," she said.

The power may stay away because there are so many doctors now, Solomon said. "When Jesus was on earth, he did healing," she said. "He gave the power to disciples. They gave power to others. Ever since having doctors around, that power is done away with."

Solomon flew Outside for two religious retreats last year. "There were healing people there and ever since I left there I feel a whole lot better," she said.

She spends her free time in Galena substitute teaching and taking care her grandchildren. "Her house is always full of children," said Jones.

In the summer, Solomon fishes with 50 of her relatives on Bishop's Mountain on the Yukon River.

"I look forward to fish camp all winter," she said. "We do things like we did when I was young. Except now, the summer is too short. We have break things up in time for school."